

CHAPTER TWO

Looking back on it all Stephanie always believed that her mother must have known what was going on at the house in Wordsworth Drive on the evenings when she was not there, and that she was lying when she claimed she did not. She had expected her mother to object to the idea of her buying a flat, after all how many girls of her age went out and bought their own pads? But she had not expected to be interrogated as to from whence the money had come. Surely her mother knew the kind of sums she could earn on a good night?

She must have been aware! There was no other way of looking at it. How could she live in the same house and be totally ignorant of what was happening? Stephanie knew from Mavis of other instances not dissimilar to hers where the mother turned a blind eye to what was going on in the family. It was not unreasonable for her to assume that this was the position in her case. There was never any doubt in her mind that her mother knew, but for her own reasons said and did nothing. That made the outburst all the more inexplicable and unreasonable. Fancy acting like that, accusing her of goodness knows what and of contacting a father who until that very moment she had no idea that she had! How, under the circumstances, could her mother pretend to act so virtuously? It was so hypocritical of her and Stephanie resolved she would never forgive her mother, never!

It was the sense of betrayal by her own mother that hurt and which caused her to lie weeping in her bedroom that evening. She half expected her mother to come to her to seek forgiveness and tried to harden her heart against her. But she never came and Stephanie was never put to the test. It was not enough to betray her, accuse her of all manner of calumny, and conceal the true nature of her parentage, her mother deserted her as well. As she lay there and thought between the sobs she realised that it was all due to her mother. Every ill she had suffered, every privation, every depravation, every time she acquiesced, it was her mother's fault. She had steadfastly told Owen that the life she led was one of choice, but she knew and acknowledged, deep down, that it was not her choice, it was her mother's. Everything she had done from the day she had married this man was with the sole thought of bringing her daughter to this. She must have hated her, her daughter, from the day she was born, from even before the day she was born! Mavis said it was not unusual for illegitimate children to be hated by their natural parent. She was just such an example, but even if that might be her lot in the World, she could hate back.

There was no doubt of it. It had been her mother who had run away, then found excuses why she should go out in the evenings, to night school and then to work, if that was what she called it. She would do anything not to be there to witness the demands made upon her daughter to satisfy, and the depravity into which she was dragged. Of course she knew! Of course she knew and approved everything! No doubt her evening's performance was discussed every evening when they went to bed, before her step-father was turfed out of bed to visit her. Her mother was every bit as bad as the rest.

And there was the matter now of her true father and that his existence had been concealed from her over all those years. Of course it had been concealed! Did they think she would have done what she had done for a man had she known at the time that he was not her father? There was another lie of her mother's making and it was plain to see why she perpetuated it. Had he, her real father, known the truth, he would have put an end to it! He would have come and taken her away to his house in the country where she would want for nothing and not have to satisfy the demands of others. If only her mother would tell her who he was, but of course she would not. If he knew, he would only go to the police and they would both go to prison for a long time. There was something comforting about that thought, but it was not something she could do. If she went to the police now, no doubt her mother and father would get their just deserts, as they said at school, but she would end up in a Home and she had heard all about Homes from Mavis.

Amongst the thoughts that wormed their way through her mind that night was the one that her mother did not go to night school or work in the evenings, but met men herself to supplement the family's income. It was easy to believe, but it made her only all the more

angry. To think that her mother was no better than she was, no better than Mrs Spencer! And she had taken that outrageous puritanical stand! No, she could never forgive her mother no matter what she said or did. It did not matter what way she looked at it. Even if she gave her the benefit of all the doubts that filled her heart and head, her mother's conduct towards her over the years and, in particular, that evening, was unforgivable.

"You don't appear to get on all that well with your mother, do you?" Stephanie did not really know Mr Brooks all that well. He was not one of her clients, as she was in the habit of describing them. She had seen him from time to time at the parties, sometimes in the vicinity of her mother, and someone had told her he worked at one of the banks in the High Street or for a firm of accountants. It was something financial, she was sure of that.

"Pardon?" she said.

"I was saying," he said, unabashed by the sharp edge to her tone. "You don't appear to get on all that well with your mother."

"But you do?" she said sarcastically. "No, I do not!"

"That is a shame," he said tactlessly, looking around the room to see where Joyce was, "because she seems to be such a nice woman."

"Has no one told you that we hate the sight of each other?" she snapped. "She is anything but a nice woman. None of us is exactly what we seem, Mr Brooks."

"Just so," he said, tugging at the tip of his short, pointed, greying beard. "But I was brought up to believe that kin should stick together."

"You have been to see Oklahoma, have you?"

"I'm sorry," he said, blinking. "I don't follow you."

"Oh, it's nothing," she murmured, looking around herself to see who there was who could politely save her from this strange man.

"It's just that if families don't stick together, who else is there? Take me and my sister. You would like her, I am sure. She is someone you can really talk to, in confidence you know. That's because she is family. Do you have a sister you can discuss problems with? Someone you can turn to?"

It sounded like a completely new line, but if he really wanted to proposition her, why did he not come straight out with it? "I have no-one like that," she said tersely, thinking that Owen really could not be considered a confidante. "Nor do I think I have a need for anyone like that. I can get by quite well on my own."

"Just so," he demurred, "but isn't that just a little sad?"

"Sad?" she said, still looking beyond him and wondering where the members of her normal entourage had disappeared to. If they were surrounding her mother there would be trouble!

"Yes, sad. I think it must be terribly sad to be alone in the world. I don't think we could bear it, Ursula and I."

"Ursula?"

"My sister," he said smugly. "We live together in the house that was our parents' and which has been our home all our lives. We are very comfortable, secure, and happy and have each other to talk to and share our secrets with."

"I don't think I am in the mood to share my secrets with anyone," Stephanie said firmly, and started to edge away.

"Just so. I tell you what, you should come to tea with us. Ursula would not mind, in fact she would like that. She could make some butterfly cakes and jam tarts, that is if you eat such things. Woman can be so fussy over what they eat now-a-days. But she is very good at cooking, very good indeed, considering. Would you like to do that - come and have tea with us?"

"Why not?" she asked herself. It sounded silly, so unusual, someone asking her to have tea with them. It was so outrageous that she could hardly bring herself to refuse.

"Can we make it next Wednesday or Thursday? Look, here's my card. I have written my address on the back. It is not at all hard to find. Actually it is not all that far from here. Could you come around at about half-past four, say?" Stephanie started to shape a refusal but

it never took form and emerged. Sheepishly she took the card.

“Let’s make it Wednesday, if that’s all right,” she said, “Thursday is early closing.”

The Brooks lived in a large, old, house, certainly much larger than her mother’s, which backed on to the park. Even as she paused on the steps before lifting the door knocker and allowing it to fall with one resounding blow, Stephanie still did not know why she was there or what had enticed her to accept the invitation. Perhaps she had become too accustomed to granting the more excessive of men’s wishes and found it hard to refuse one which was modest. A middle-aged woman opened the door and stared at and beyond her for several seconds before saying anything. Stephanie had the feeling that she had come to the wrong house on the wrong day, or that Mr Brooks had omitted to tell his sister that she was visiting them to partake of their specialities in butterfly cakes and jam tarts. Her heart leapt at the thought; it was all a misunderstanding and she should go home.

“I am sorry,” said the woman, suddenly, “but I feel that you look lovely.” Stephanie had dressed with care with something modest that would catch the eye but not appear provocative. It was not easy. As she sat at her mirror she was tempted to make up and don her trinkets and embellishments, lower her neckline, or wear something that clung tightly to her figure leaving no room for doubt. But then she had rejected all that. “And I am being dreadfully rude and not at all hospitable,” the woman continued. “Do forgive me, but I am Ursula, Benjamin’s sister. He tells me he mentioned me to you. Do come in. Follow me and come right through to the conservatory.”

The hallway was light, clean, and airy, decorated in pastel shades with the cornices and other features picked out in darker colours. Light streamed down from a large, stained glass window half way up the stairs, and landed at their feet, splashing her shoes as Stephanie was led into a large room filled with dark furniture and then through to sit, surrounded by tall plants, in the warm balmy air of the conservatory which overlooked the short garden. “I hope we won’t be too hot out here,” said the woman. “We really have too much room, much more than we need or know what to do with. But it was our parents’ house and we were brought up here. It has been our one and only home and we couldn’t bring ourselves to move to anywhere smaller. It wouldn’t be the same and I know where everything is here. No, we will stay here and live out our lives happily together and just gently fade away when the time comes. But I am forgetting myself. Do, please, sit down and we can talk whilst Benjamin finishes getting himself ready. He has only just come in from work and such a fuss there was as well! In fact, you must have almost bumped into him when you arrived. Do tell me if you are too warm. We are used to it.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Stephanie. “Have I come too early?”

“Not at all,” said Ursula, waving her hand. “You were very punctual. The clock was just striking the half hour as you knocked at the door. No, it is Benjamin who is tardy, but it does give us a chance to get to know each other.”

“It is a lovely house,” said Stephanie, thinking that she did not want anyone getting to know her, not if they did not already know all about her.

“Oh, we love it, and we have kept it just as it was when dear Mama was still alive. Well, almost just as there was some dreadful wall paper in the hall which Benjamin said had to go. So it went! You should have seen it, so dark and foreboding, he said. I said that I was not having anything like that in my house which should be light and airy. So it went! But I will leave it to my brother to show you around after tea. You will be able to see his collection of toothbrushes. Yes my dear, I did say toothbrushes. He has them from all over the World. He even has a Roman one. He bought it on a stall in Peckham High Street some years ago, would you believe? Oh, you should have been here when he came home with it! Such excitement! He didn’t stop talking about it for a week. He will also probably show you his collection of matchbox labels. He has one of the largest in the World! And if you are really fortunate, he will let you look at his telescope.”

“Telescope?” said Stephanie with a mild attack of panic as it sounded rather like an euphemism.

“Telescope,” said Ursula, firmly. “An optical telescope,” she added as if there were

other kinds that needed elimination. "Sometimes he looks up at the stars and the planets, staying up until silly hours of the morning. Other times, he simply watches the people in the park."

"He spies on the people in the park?"

"It is hardly spying," said Ursula robustly. "These are people walking in a public place, or doing other things that the public do in public places. And," she added, dropping her voice both in pitch and in volume, "sometimes doing what people should not do in public places, certainly not if one observes the various conventions and protocols as to how one should behave in public, not to mention the bye-laws,. Not that I am able to look, you understand. But he comes and tells me everything he sees, Benjamin does. He is good like that. He is the eyes for both of us. Oh dear, that does not sound grammatically correct, but you will excuse it, won't you?" Stephanie found herself feeling even more uncomfortable although she was not sure why. "I remember, he used to tell me about these two young girls he used to watch. How vividly he would describe them. One was plain and quite unattractive in all respects although I am sure that she must have had hidden virtues as she seemed to be very popular. And the other, well the other he effused over and could never quite find the words to adequately describe her, no matter how much he tried. He told me she was very pretty, then changed that to exceptionally pretty, beautiful and finally exquisite. He was in raptures about her auburn hair and poetic as to the way it glistened and sparkled in the sun. There were days when he would come in and rush upstairs without do much as a how-d'ye-do, saying that they were there. I asked what they did, these girls but he would never tell me. Then, after dinner, we would fantasise about these girls, in particular the red-haired one. Benjamin would say how much he would like her as a daughter, so many times that I came to look upon her as my adopted niece."

"Did your brother have any idea who these two girls were?" said Stephanie, beginning to redden. It embarrassed her to colour and the more embarrassed she became, the more she coloured. She felt that Ursula must have noticed it although she tactfully gave her no indication that she had.

"No, my dear, he did not," the older woman said. "Not at the time at least. But I hope you will accept the fact that this beauty gradually came to have a place in our household, although she could never know it. In particular she came to have a place in my heart as my niece by proxy. Can you understand that?"

"I suppose so," said Stephanie cautiously. "For how many years has this being going on?"

"Going on? It didn't go on. There was a dreadful day, although we did not know it at the time, when she did not appear. The plain girl was there, but not my niece. She was not there the following day, nor the day after that. We began to think that we had lost her altogether. I was, can I say, heart-broken."

"Over this girl that you did not know and had never even met?"

"Oh, but I knew her. I knew her so well and what Benjamin could not tell me I filled in from my imagination. I have a very agile imagination, you know. I have very acute senses, too. But I will finish my little tale before he comes down. I cannot leave it as it is, incomplete. You have no objection if I go on?"

"No," said Stephanie.

"Well, I never gave up hope but Benjamin, although he looked in the park and in the town, told me that it appeared this girl had disappeared off of the face of the Earth. Then one night, several months ago, he came home full of excitement proclaiming that he had found her. She had been at a function to which he had been invited. He described her as being radiant and said he could barely take his eyes from her. I cannot begin to tell you how overjoyed I felt. I asked if he had spoken to her, my adopted niece, and he said he had not because it was almost impossible to get near you. But he said you were absolutely beautiful, those were his exact words. In a way I was cross because he had not talked to you, but I was also delighted to know you were still here, in this area, and close at hand. I told him that he should invite you to tea the next time he saw you. He said that was something he could not do, but I told him that he must. I insisted! So he did, and here you are. And do you know the most silly

thing about all this? I had absolutely know intention of telling you anything about it, yet here I am, spilling the beans as they say, although I am not sure exactly why. You are not offended are you?"

"No," said Stephanie, contemplatively. "I am not offended. I don't really know what to say. I suppose I am surprised, but all of this is so unexpected."

"And how about the thought of you becoming my adopted niece, my dear? We have no other living relatives for you to compete with."

"Well, I don't think I need another father," said Stephanie, feeling a little more relaxed. "But I would not object to having an aunt."

"Then we can be your aunt and uncle. Would you like to adopt us informally in much the same way I have adopted you as my niece?"

"I don't know," said Stephanie, hesitantly.

"Oh, do say you will, Stephanie! You see, I even know your name and it is such a lovely name and so unusual. Do you know why you were called Stephanie?"

"No, I do not. My mother has never told me. Nor is she likely to."

"Then that is very remiss of her. Perhaps it is a family name?"

"Not that I am aware of. I do not know anything about my mother's family or my father's."

"Oh dear. Matters are sounding worse than I feared," said Ursula. "I think you sound like someone in desperate need of an aunt, but we can come to that later. I trust you are still happy to stay to tea? That is if Benjamin ever puts in an appearance!" Stephanie stared at the small, smart, prim woman who was perched anxiously on the edge of her chair, her hands clenched, her unblinking eyes fixed upon her. "Do say you will," she said.

"Yes," said Stephanie softly, "I will stay for tea."

"Well, what did you think of Ursula's butterfly cakes?" asked Benjamin as he stacked the dishes on a tray ready to carry them through to the kitchen.

"If I tell the truth, I thought they were delicious and far better than anything you can buy at the baker's in the High Street," said Stephanie.

"And I made them all myself," announced Ursula, appearing in the doorway, but looking at Benjamin rather than Stephanie. "Please don't think of us as rude and clearing away, but I have to go to work soon, though I suppose it would not go amiss if I were a few minutes late on what is a very special day for us. Oh, don't let my departure bother you, Stephanie. You may stay here as long as you wish."

"Work?" queried Stephanie. "Do you work?" Ursula turned to face her and smiled.

"Do you know the small restaurant a few doors along from the baker's you mentioned? I run that, with more than a little help, I must add. In fact, I own it. I like to call it a restaurant although most would refer to it as a café. And when I say that I own it, I must confess that I only hold the lease. Mr Wick owns the freehold. I wouldn't want you to think that I am something big in real estate. That's what they call it now, isn't it, Benjamin?"

"It is, my dear. And it should be understood that this business venture of my sister's makes absolutely no money no matter how creative I am with the books," Benjamin said, beaming and taking his sister's arm. "Not a penny. In fact, it is something of a drain on our resources. My friend Mr Frobisher says that we should sell the lease, but Ursula won't hear of it!"

"I should think not!" said Ursula. "It's a hobby of mine. No, it's more like a vocation, to provide basic, simple, inexpensive food for the under-privileged. That is what I do."

"Now just listen to her!" Benjamin chuckled. "This sister of mine, your aunt if I may so describe her, is sounding more like a missionary in the Gorbals or the Bronx than a genteel lady in down-town Bromley. Have you ever eaten in there, Stephanie?"

"I think I might have done once," she said cautiously.

"You have eaten in my restaurant?" exclaimed Ursula. "How wonderful! I cannot understand how I did not sense your presence, but I must get along. Mr Frobisher? Are you seeing him tonight, Benjamin?"

"I am," asserted her brother, turning to Stephanie. "You should meet him. He is very

useful to know. He is an agent for Diamond Assurance as well as being something important in the City. He provides investment advice and," he paused and dropped his voice as if the next-door neighbours might be eavesdropping, "he often has some good inside tips. We run an investment syndicate, well, he runs it really. There must be about twenty of us in it including the chaps where he lives, and it is growing steadily. Mark you, we are quite selective as to who we allow to join. You can't be too careful. Do you dabble in the market? Would you like to stay and meet him?"

"Be careful, Stephanie," called Ursula from the hall. "He is only after your money. And I must say that we do see very little back in the way of income from Mr Frobisher."

"Pay no attention to her, Stephanie," said Benjamin. "I keep telling her that it is a long term investment and that all the gains are ploughed back in. That's the only way to get money to grow. But she won't listen. Anyone can play the market for short term gain, I tell her, but we are after long term growth and we are all doing reasonably well."

"We make a fine pair, don't we?" said Ursula, re-appearing in the doorway. "Him with his investments that produce no income."

"They will! You just wait and see!"

"And me with my subsidised restaurant."

"Yes," agreed Benjamin. "A fine pair. But you have not confided in us whether you dabble in the market, Stephanie?"

She looked from brother to sister. Perhaps that was the real reason for inviting her. It was not because he had been spying on her for years and had seen no doubt more than he should have. It was not because they wanted to informally adopt her as a niece, an idea which was not without its attractions for her. He was simply trying to drum up business and extract some of her hard-earned savings from her! Well, no-one was going to get their hands on her money! "No," she said, cautiously. "I don't really have that kind of money."

"Nor do we," beamed Benjamin, as if near-poverty was a common virtue. "But we put aside a small amount each week. It's just like having the man from the Pearl call and you pay him. It's for our old age. Mr Frobisher keeps the books and I audit them once a year, not that I ever find anything amiss, you understand. He prepares monthly statements so that we all know where we stand. It is nice to watch our little nest-egg grow so that one day we can be wealthy enough for Ursula to retire."

"I don't want to retire!" called Ursula, having retreated again to the hall. "In any event, it isn't the income that keeps me working. I enjoy it!"

"She is incredible, isn't she?" said Benjamin in a low whisper. "Although we are not allowed to say that to her. She has been like it since birth but I think she still feels slightly embarrassed when someone draws attention to it."

"That's all right," murmured Stephanie, not knowing what he was talking about. "I really must be going too."

"And so must I," said Ursula, tying an ancient bonnet over her head. "I really do not like leaving Judy on the pavement too long. She is a pleasant girl but apt to be somewhat wayward at times."

"I have to go," insisted Stephanie, feeling that although they were talking about it, no-one was actually leaving the house. It was as if they were standing there, waiting for a train to stop. "I do have someone coming to see me this evening. May I walk with you, Ursula?"

"Why, yes, of course!" said Ursula. "If you don't mind walking at a fairly leisurely pace."

"I will get your stick," said Benjamin, smiling as he saw the look of astonishment that spread across Stephanie's face. "I told you she is wonderful, didn't I?" he hissed.

They paused in the light of the hallway as Ursula reached up and planted kiss on her brother's offered cheek. "Stephanie, my dear, before we go, may I do something and be very personal with you? May I touch your face? I would like to know just what my adopted niece looks like and whether that brother of mine has been telling the whole truth."

"Why, yes," said Stephanie, feeling self conscious and looking to Benjamin who was nodding encouragement. Ursula's hands landed softly on her shoulder and then moved gently upwards. They were as soft as the lightest of breezes and Stephanie found them incredibly

soothing.

“Oh, my!” said Ursula, almost to herself. “You have the most lovely features, and your complexion! Benjamin told me that you have a perfect figure as well but don’t you worry. I am not going to explore that, so don’t get the wrong idea about me. Oh, he didn’t exaggerate in the least when he said you are beautiful. And your hair, I adore the feel of it! Benjamin says its colour lies somewhere between auburn and chestnut; you see I remember everything he tells me but I cannot imagine for one moment exactly what he means though I am sure it is breathtaking for those who can see you. Isn’t it strange that I should know that the grass is green and the sky is blue, and that daisies are white, and that your hair is chestnut, yet I am unable to picture exactly what any of these is like.”

“I am sorry,” murmured Stephanie, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Don’t be, my dear,” whispered Ursula “It is just the way things are. That is something I have learned in life, to accept things just the way they are. I expect it of others and I could not do other than expect it of me. You understand what I mean, my dear?” Stephanie had no doubt that the reference was directed at her. It felt like a reprimand, like a gentle slap across the cheek, just enough to draw colour without stinging. “Just walk beside me,” said Ursula once they were on the pavement. “I do know the way very well but it is always pleasant to have a companion just so long as I do not become dependent on them. Benjamin taught me the way some years ago and I am fine just so long as the Council do not dig a hole in the pavement or move a bus stop. I find it a straightforward walk, to my restaurant, around the park and up to the High Street. Ah, I know what you are wondering, my dear. You are thinking how can she possibly run a restaurant and be un-sighted, leave alone cook? Judy acts as my eyes there in much the same way as Benjamin does at home. But I know every inch of the place, every nook and cranny, every table, where the cutlery and cruets are kept, what is on the menu, everything! I have to confess that much of the food finds its way into the premises in cans and comes out of them to go to table. As for cooking, I have diplomas but I cannot cope with the preparation of fresh vegetables although we do sometimes have them at home when Benjamin prepares them for me. But at the restaurant I set out to provide simple, inexpensive, meals for poor folk, nothing fancy. You should come in and see me and sample my cuisine some time. Where do you eat normally?”

“At home,” said Stephanie. “In my flat. I normally cook for myself.”

“And eat alone? I think that’s sad,” said Ursula. “You must come to the restaurant again, even if it is only once.”

“I will,” said Stephanie, feeling that she had a thousand and one questions she wanted to ask, all of them very personal. They had reached the wrought iron gates of the park which stood to, ready to be closed half an hour after sunset, when Ursula suddenly stopped.

“Oh, can you smell them?” she cried. “Can you smell the lilacs my dear? Such a scent, I will always associate them with you. What are they like this year?”

“They are very good, I believe,” said Stephanie, coming to terms with the fact that she was uncertain which the lilacs were.

“I am not sure which it is coming from, the white or the lilac ones. Oh, I think it’s the white ones this evening. They are different. And white, it is such an elusive colour. How would you describe it to one who has never seen it?”

“I don’t really know,” said Stephanie. “Pure? Chaste? Perhaps like freshly fallen snow?”